RESOURCE GUIDE No 4

Promoting resilience in fostered children and young people

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Better knowledge for better practice

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Lisa Bostock

SCIE
Social Care Institute for Excellence
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Social Care Institute for Excellence
1st Floor
Goldings House
2 Hay's Lane
London SE1 2HB
UK
www.scie.org.uk

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Dr Lisa Bostock is a Senior Research Analyst at the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

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- *A National Voice*, a user group of young people who are, or who have been, looked after in England, for embodying what this guide is about – the strengths of children and their families
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Key to the boxes

Key messages/key readings

Research findings

Practice examples

Quotes from young people, foster carers or practitioners

Poem by a young person in foster care

'What I live for'

I live for something rare and true
I'm looking for the words so that I can tell you
It contains love and happiness
The things that we really miss

Some hearts are made out of gold
But others are like stone so hard and cold
Behind their closed doors
They're screaming out but nobody knows

The feelings of anger they lock up inside
It's so hard to push these feelings aside
When you go to sleep at night
You see the birds in circled flight

And when you awaken the following day
You feel lost like the needle dropped in the hay
I live something rare and true
I've found the words to give to you

(Young person, 16 years old, from a consultation conducted by Voices from Care Cymru, a user group of young people who are, or who have been, looked after in Wales[5])

Summary

Why childcare professionals matter

This resource guide looks at how childcare professionals can make a difference to young people's experiences of foster care.

Professionals play an important role by supporting caring relationships, ensuring that school is a positive experience, and promoting the self-esteem of children and young people in the foster care system.

This resource guide unpacks the concept of resilience and provides helpful hints for practice as well as access to further resources.

It is aimed at the qualifying and newly qualified childcare professional and outlines why they matter in the life of a foster child.

Positive relationships, at any age in the life span, can help improve poor self-image. People who take an interest, who listen, who care and love people, make others feel better. They bolster self-esteem.

"It's just so rewarding, so rewarding ... it's a job that's really satisfying." (foster carer[1])

Children who are not loved at home may still develop feelings of self-worth if a relative takes an interest, a teacher appears concerned and caring, or if a social worker responds with kindness and consistency.

How childcare professionals can make a difference

Research shows that focusing on the strengths of young people is crucial to future outcomes. This means focusing on 'resilience factors', or things that help children and young people cope with adversity.

The sorts of things that buffer children and young people from unfavourable circumstances include access to a caring relationship with an adult such as a foster carer. This may also mean children having contact with their birth families and every effort should be made to get this right.

"Care has brought me to realise I am a person in my own right, but I know I have been very lucky – [I have a] good social worker, good residential worker and good foster parent." (16-year-old girl[2])

The experience that foster children and young people have at school also helps them to overcome difficulties and every effort should be made to ensure that this experience is positive, by encouraging them to take part in school activities they enjoy, to help build their self-esteem.

"My foster carer helped me a lot ... she [has] made me more confident in my school work." (11-year-old girl[3])

A sense of direction is very important to young people in troubled circumstances because it can provide stability and control. This means working with young people on their goals and how to reach them and helping them to build a picture of what the future may hold.

A second way of helping young people feel more in control is involving them in forums that promote the participation of young people in the development of services for looked-after children.

Practice example
Cambridge has a 'Just us' group of looked-after children who meet monthly across three localities in the county. The young people in this group were consulted during the Best Value review of the authority and also contribute ideas on how to train staff to work sensitively with looked-after children[4].

Fostering success

Fostering success is about recognising and supporting the strengths of children and their families. It is about making sure that that fostered children and young people have access to positive relationships and feel happy at school and it is about working with them to choose outcomes that reflect their own aspirations and making every effort to enable them to achieve these aspirations.

Who this resource guide is for

This resource guide is aimed primarily at qualifying and newly qualified childcare professionals and outlines why, as a professional, you matter in the life of a foster child.

This guide will be useful to the following groups:

- qualifying social workers
- post-qualifying social workers
- foster carers
- Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) workers
- qualifying teachers
- educational psychologists

The guide also provides resources on the development of service delivery, and will interest:

- inspectors for the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate (CSCI) and the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales (CISW)
- childcare coordinators and quality assurance managers
- members of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs)

The resource guide will benefit your practice by:

- helping you to engage in the debate about what policies will best serve children and their families in your own agencies
- providing a review of the knowledge base on adopting a resilience-based approach and will help you in your own cases
- showing you how social work and social care agencies work, highlighting practical examples of where agencies support the strengths of children and their families

What this resource guide is about

"It's, like, foster care ... it works differently for different people. It goes well for some people, it doesn't for others." (young person in foster care[6])

This resource guide looks at the things that children and young people live for – love, happiness and hope for the future – the kinds of things that children in foster care can really miss. It is about the strengths of children and their families and the ways in which professionals can make a difference by recognising, initiating and sustaining caring relationships, ensuring that school is a positive experience and promoting the self-esteem of children and young people in foster care.

The guide focuses on what makes foster care work well for children and young people. It looks at what is known about helping children to cope in difficult circumstances. In general, this appears to reflect what is included in the literature on resilience[8].

It unpacks the concept of resilience and provides helpful hints for practice as well as access to further resources. These messages also apply to children and young people living in residential care.

Key message
Resilience-enhancing factors include:

- building a sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy
- having at least one close tie with a committed adult
- being happy and involved at school

Foster care should be able to offer children these opportunities[11,12].

This resource guide will examine each of the resilience-enhancing factors identified above, providing practical examples of how you can promote resilience-enhancing factors for children and young people.

The guide only covers the resilience-enhancing factors highlighted in SCIE Knowledge review 5: *Fostering success: An exploration of the research literature in foster care*[8], as these are seen as crucial to future fostering outcomes. Further reading about encouraging resilience can be found in Appendix 2.

First, however, the guide will examine what is meant by child-focused fostering, and why pursuing resilience-promoting strategies is an integral part of a child-focused fostering service.

How this resource guide was created

This resource guide draws primarily, but not exclusively, on two pieces of work commissioned by SCIE that contributed to our knowledge about innovative fostering practice: Knowledge review 4: *Innovative, tried and tested: A review of good practice in fostering*[7] and Knowledge review 5: *Fostering success: An exploration of the research literature in foster care*[8].

The SCIE Advisory Group on Fostering has also provided a crucial source of knowledge on the features of a child and family-focused fostering service (see Appendix 1 for a list of participants). Contributions from children and young people who use fostering services have shaped this work.

SCIE is undertaking a range of work that relates to this guide, including practice guides on children and young people's participation in the improvement of social care services, human growth and development and good fostering practice, as well as a knowledge review on adoption research[9].

SCIE has also published Position paper 3: *Has service user participation made a difference to social care services?*[10] that looks at the impact of children and young people's participation on change and improvement in social care services.

What is child-focused fostering?

Key message
Child-focused should mean that the child or young person makes, or is at the centre of, all decisions about their lives and is supported to enable them to determine their own goals within the context of a respectful and caring environment.

Child-focused fostering means that all decisions must be taken in the best interests of the child and that decisions should be taken in partnership with children and their families or advocates. It is the first principle of Choice Protects, a Department for Education and Skills (DfES) initiative that reviews fostering and placement services in England (www.dfes.gov.uk/choiceprotects)[13] and the National Assembly for Wales' (NAW) Children First initiative that focuses on investing in children's services in order to enable children to lead fuller, more successful lives as adults (www.childrenfirst.wales.gov.uk)[14].

In both England and Wales, the practice guidance for the *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families* should assist professionals in making child-focused decisions about young people[15].

In this resource guide we use the term 'child-focused'. However, we recognise that this term has been criticised for its 'paternalistic' overtones, because to some it suggests that adults must adopt a focus on the child, rather than acknowledging the legal rights of children and young people to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. The Blueprint Project for a Child-Centred Public Care System, based at the Voice for the Child in Care and supported by the National Children's Bureau, explicitly uses 'child-centred' rather than 'child-focused' in order to reinforce the importance of involving children and young people in care in decisions both at individual and service delivery level. For more information about the Blueprint Project visit www.vcc-uk.org

Children are popularly represented as passive, dependent, vulnerable and in need of protection or, alternatively, as anti-social, deviant, irresponsible and in need of firm social control. In other words, adults cast children in the role of either victim or villain[16-18]. What adults tend to think less about is how children and young people negotiate difficult circumstances and how they draw on their reserves of resilience to overcome life's adversities[19-22].

A resilience-based approach shifts attention away from focusing on problems towards a focus on the developmental strengths of children and young people. We are all born resilient but find it easier to withstand adversity in the context of caring, consoling and enduring relationships. There are a number of features that are important to resilience, particularly feeling happy and supported at school, developing self-esteem and, as we grow up, self-efficacy or the feeling of having a sense of control over our lives. The fundamental building block of resilience is an attachment to

a secure base. For children in the care system, a child-focused foster system will make every effort to nurture the development of secure relationships and identify a child's social support networks[11, 23-8].

5

About resilience

5.1. What is resilience?

Resilience refers to the qualities that cushion a vulnerable child from the worst effects of adversity and that may help a "child or young person to cope, survive and even thrive in the face of great hurt and disadvantage"[12]. While it may not always be possible to protect a child from further adversity, finding ways to boost a child's resilience should enhance the likelihood of better long-term outcomes (see Appendix 2 for key reading on resilience).

Research evidence from follow-up studies of people who have been fostered suggests that some of the difficulties that young people initially experience upon leaving the care system – loneliness, unemployment, debt and settling down – subsequently improve, with some young people re-establishing friendly contact with foster families even after serious breakdowns. It is probably only a minority, albeit a substantial one at around 30%, who get into serious difficulties in the long term[8].

5.2. Understanding the importance of resilience

This resource guide looks at the importance of focusing on the resilience-enhancing factors in the lives of fostered children and young people. It draws on the findings of SCIE Knowledge review 5*: Fostering success: An exploration of the research literature in foster care*, which looked at the impact of fostering on outcomes for children and young people[8]. This review found that focusing on the strengths of young people is crucial to future outcomes. This means focusing on 'resilience factors', or things that help children and young people withstand adversity.

5.3. Understanding resilience-enhancing factors

Resilience-enhancing factors are the sorts of things in a child's or young person's life that help them to cope in unfavourable circumstances or times of difficulty. Resilience factors can include access to a caring relationship with adults such as foster carers and can also include contact between a child and their birth families.

The experience that foster children and young people have at school may also help them to overcome difficulties and every effort should be made to ensure that their experiences are positive, including encouraging them to take part in school activities that they enjoy to help build their self-esteem.

A sense of direction is also very important to young people in troubled circumstances because it can provide stability and control. This involves working with young people to build up a picture of what the future may hold: to develop goals and plans for reaching them[8].

5.4. Promoting self-esteem

Self-esteem is one of the fundamental building blocks of resilience. Principally, self-esteem flows from positive attachment experiences, but can be enhanced by participation in valued activities[29,30]. It is about feeling successful, not simply academically, but also in other areas such as in relationships or in spare time activities. This means that encouraging foster children to take part in school activities which they enjoy can be an important source of self-esteem[1].

Research finding
Positive relationships, at any age in the life span, can help improve poor self-concept. People who take an interest, who listen, who care and love us, make us feel better. They improve our image and bolster our self-esteem. Children who are not loved at home may nevertheless develop feelings of self-worth if a relative takes an interest, a teacher appears concerned and caring, or a residential worker responds with kindness and consistency[11].

In one study of the relationship between experiences of local authority care and offending behaviour, interviews with care leavers revealed that it was possible for young people to develop secure attachments to their foster carers, even when they were placed at a relatively late age. Furthermore, such attachments were shown to be strongly protective against offending behaviour[8].

Making the effort to show that you care about the children and young people who you work with, even if the relationship is short term, shows them that you value them. Simple displays of sincerity will increase self-esteem.

"I always try and remember [the] birthdays of the young people that I am working with. I mean, not all of them, not if they are too young to know, but where they have low self-esteem, I try and remember their birthday, it shows them that I value them." (social worker, initial assessment team [31])

Young people confirm the importance of promoting self-esteem. A National Voice, which is an organisation run by and for young people who are or who have been in care in England, have been running a National Foster Care Campaign that aims to use the views of young people to improve fostering services. As part of the campaign, 150 young people in care took part in the *Amplify* consultation event (for more information visit www.anationalvoice.org). The *Amplify*[32] report makes the following recommendations about how to bolster the self-esteem of young people experiencing care:

- social work education should actively promote a positive image of young people from care
- local social services departments should recognise, respect and reward the unique and special skills and talents of all the young people from care in England
- young people should have access to other groups of young people from care and a 24-hour care helpline service should be established[32]

Practice examples
The Well-being, Creativity and Play project, hosted by the National Children's Bureau and funded by the Children and Young People's Unit at the DfES, aims to build self-esteem by exhibiting the art, on display at the National Gallery, of children who live in public care. For more information visit www.ncb.org.uk and www.cypu.gov.uk

Kids Company, who work with troubled children, also use art to improve self-esteem and the public image of children who are experiencing difficulties. The art installation *Shrinking childhoods* at the Tate Modern aims to create a council estate environment. In each flat, children who use Kids Company create rooms which reflect their experiences of childhood. For more information visit www.kidsco.org.uk

5.5. Promoting self-efficacy

Self-esteem is closely linked with developing a sense of self-efficacy or self-direction. Self-efficacy grows from experience. It is about qualities of optimism, persistence and believing that one's own efforts can make a difference. A person's sense of self-efficacy is improved by opportunities to take responsibility or contribute to decisions which affect the minutiae or broader trend of one's life[33,34].

Two important ways that child welfare professionals, such as managers, social workers and foster carers, can help young people in care develop a sense of self-efficacy are through:

- encouraging young people to define their own outcomes
- involving children and young people in the development of services

5.5.1. Helping young people define their own outcomes

A sense of direction is very important to young people in troubled circumstances because it provides a sense of stability and control[35]. The involvement of children and young people in planning their care is a crucial way of promoting that sense of control or self-direction. Working with young people to develop goals or outcomes can help promote a sense of what the future might hold and how to reach it[36].

Practice example

Information communications technology can have a major impact on building self-efficacy. The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames has developed a website to enable foster children to contribute to their local authority looked-after children review forms and to e-mail their social workers[4] (www.kingston.gov.uk).

There are a number of ways you can support young people's self-efficacy:

- involve children in discussions about their needs and their future
- help them to contribute to care plans and reviews, ensure that their wishes are always considered and where possible addressed
- give clear information, making sure that young people know about:
  - their reasons for entering into and remaining in care
  - their rights while they are in care
  - future plans and how they can influence these
- try to regard young people as resources (rather than problems) in process of seeking solutions in their lives
- encourage young people to make choices, declare preferences and define outcomes for themselves and respect these preferences[12]

Research suggests that these various opportunities and experiences can teach young people that their opinions are valuable and help them to learn how to influence, negotiate and problem solve.

5.5.2. Involving young people in service development

A second way of promoting self-efficacy is through the participation of young people in the development of services for looked-after children. Official guidance has emphasised the importance of ensuring that the voices of children in the care system are listened to and promoted.

Involving children and young people in planning and developing fostering services is a key objective of Choice Protects[13]. As part of this work the Choice Protects team asked the Fostering Network and The Who Cares? Trust to find out about children's views on commissioning. They surveyed a number of local authorities to establish how developed their children's participation services were and what children thought about the services they received. The report *Listen then commission*[37] makes a number of recommendations about how children's views can be incorporated into the commissioning process and these

recommendations will be brought to the attention of local authorities. For more information visit www.thefostering.net and www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

There are now a host of systems across local authorities for encouraging feedback from young people, including questionnaires, e-mail, meetings with senior managers and local councillors, as well as involvement in Best Value reviews[4].

Practice example
Cambridge has a 'Just us' group of looked-after children who meet monthly across three localities in the county. The young people in this group were consulted during the Best Value review of the authority and also contributed to ideas on how to train staff to work sensitively with looked-after children[4].

Some local authorities have harnessed the potential of information communications technology to promote children's participation and improve their service to young people.

Practice example
The Kids in Care Together group, set up by Norfolk County Council has established a website (www.kict.norfolk.gov.uk/kict) with helpful information for looked-after children, including foster children and young people. The group provides advice to the social services department and has had a direct impact on policy and practice evaluation and change[4].

The Tunnel Light Project set up by Lincolnshire Social Services uses web-based technologies to strengthen the relationships between its family placement service, foster carers, adoptive parents, looked-after children and young people and the public. The creation of their website www.family-lincs.org.uk has been the centrepiece of this project. The project has four main aims:

- to create appropriate e-support between families and the Lincolnshire family placement service
- to establish e-communities between foster families and looked after children
- to provide alternatives to traditional education and training programs, the development of management policies as part of the local authority's e-government agenda and to provide the general public with information about fostering and adoption services
- to establish an alternative means of communication in a large rural county[38]

The involvement of young people and foster carers throughout the development of this project has provided a valuable perspective to the local authority's thinking in terms of presentation of information to the general public, the sorts of resources that carers require and their training needs.

Children and young people have also been involved in the design of CareZone[39]. CareZone is The Who Cares? Trust's new secure online services for children in public care. It is an innovative package of child-centred services that aims to provide children with their own personal space. Visit www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/carezone.htm

CareZone is the first service of its kind because it:

- features child-focused technology, developed with continuous input from children resulting in services they need and want
- provides children with their own personal space. Children in care are moved around frequently and personal possessions are often lost. CareZone provides a secure virtual space where these children can digitally store items of personal value
- builds trusted relationships with children over time, making it easier to ask for help if, and when, it's needed
- provides services that reduce the sense of isolation, as well as offering resources from a range of quality suppliers of information on health, care, well-being and education
- creates a community of care, including children, their carers and other allied professionals. All of these features are highly

secure and are accessed using Smart Card technology[39]

5.5.3. Practice and service delivery issues

Despite the development of ever more sophisticated means of communication, there is still a concern that young people's involvement in service planning is confined to the triangle of core support: young person, foster carer and social worker. It is within this triangle that children and young people exercise their influence on day-to-day decision making, having little or no opportunities to comment on service delivery more generally[10,40].

"If I was in charge of social services, I'd listen to them [people in care] first, see what they've got to say. I can't just make the rules on what I think is best for them." (young person in care[41])

While managers express a commitment to young people having a greater say on service development, questions about the responsibility of managers and policy makers to create the right conditions for listening, learning and producing change remain unanswered, and the perspectives and experiences of young people are lost. The lack of systematic policies and practices to support and integrate the feedback from children and young people limits opportunities for young people to develop self-efficacy and a sense of involvement. Where evaluations do exist, the evidence suggests that the participation of children and young people is having little impact on decisions made in relation to agency policy and practice[10].

"... if I'm really honest ... I don't know what young people in our fostering services think or feel about the care they're getting." (senior social services manager[40])

SCIE Position paper 3: *Has service user participation made a difference to social care services?*[10] brings together the key themes and findings from six literature reviews which looked at the impact of service user participation on change and improvement in social care services. Reviews on older people, people with learning difficulties, disabled people as well as children and young people, were also conducted as part of the project.

Messages from the research show the need for a range of models of involvement, depending on the level of activity to which participants wish to commit. What is important is that the choice is there, and that the involvement, or partnership, is real. Service user participation should relate clearly to a decision that the organisation plans to make and which the organisation is willing to make based on the views of the people they are consulting. It should be made clear what service users may or may not be able to change[10].

One of the aims of the Blueprint Project mentioned earlier is to move the attention of managers, policy makers and other professionals away from performance targets, back to what children want from the care system[41-3].

The Blueprint Project explored knowledge from three sources: what children and young people said, what policy makers and staff said, and research findings. These three elements were combined to produce a set of materials designed to help national and local agencies to provide child-centred care for looked-after children. All of the following Blueprint Project materials can be downloaded for free at www.vcc-uk.org:

- 'Start with the child, stay with the child: a blueprint for a child-centred approach to children and young people in public care'[41]
- 'Young people as partners in the Blueprint project: what young people had to say'[44]
- 'The care experience: summary of Blueprint's work on local authorities'[45]
- 'Try a different way'[46]: a set of 10 A4 sheets intended to be used by service providers as

ideas for discussion and possible implementation within their agencies

As part of the project, the canvassing of children's views has involved a participation programme overseen by a young person's participation and development worker and also a care leaver, Karen McBye. More than 20 looked-after young people have been trained as 'Blueprint reporters' who interview other looked-after young people about their views. From their interviews, some common themes have emerged:

- young people do not feel involved in review meetings
- young people experience problems with identity
- young people are not listened to or do not have their views taken into account[41]

"Young people get tired of never being listened to and the fact that, even when they are listened to, nothing ever changes. But I hope that something will come out of this one." (Jahnine Davis, Blueprint reporter[42])

The research strand of the Blueprint Project has identified four key themes:

- relationships
- identity and individuality
- choice, control and competence
- dependence and independence

The project is moving away from the idea of finding the 'ideal family' and is instead looking at the importance of promoting "a strong, positive relationship with one person"[42]. The Blueprint team call this person a BFG or big friendly giant. BFGs should be chosen by the child and could ideally come from their existing social support network[43]. Family Group Conferences may represent an important method to identify BFGs. The Blueprint team suggest that where there is no obvious candidate, the child or young person would be helped to find someone to be their BFG – either someone who has worked with them in a professional capacity or someone who is specifically appointed to be their BFG[43].

For children who have been placed with foster families with different religious, ethnic or cultural identities to their own, a BFG from the same background who can act as a 'cultural guide' may be particularly important. Gilligan highlights the story of Sue Jardine who, at 18 months, was adopted in the UK from Hong Kong. Upon reflecting on her own, often difficult, cultural experiences of growing up in a transracial placement, Sue suggests that a cultural guide such as a BFG would be a great help to a child growing up outside their culture[47].

Practice example

Cultural guides could help transracially placed children to know about … cultural festivals, show them how to cook, or how to approach concerns such as hair or skin care[47].

6

The importance of one interested adult

There are two important ways that a child-focused fostering service can offer secure and caring relationships to children and young people:

- by focusing on strategies that promote recruitment and retention of carers
- by providing a sustainable link between foster care and birth families

6.1. Foster carers

Secure attachments underpin the physical and emotional ties that support and sustain us as we grow and develop and can console us in times of distress[48,49]. Throughout our lives, we retain the need for support, encouragement and consolation. For children in the care system, it is not always immediately obvious that they have a secure base in the world[12]. Living in care may mean fragile relationships are broken, some never to recover[34].

6.1.1. Recruiting and retaining foster carers

Recruitment and retention strategies are the key means of finding and keeping the right kinds of foster carers, that is, foster carers who genuinely care for the children in their care and who, in some cases, are able to persist with and manage 'disturbed attachment behaviour' without the child or young person feeling rejected[8].

There are over 76,000 children and young people in public care on any given day in the UK, around 50,000 (64%) of whom live with 38,000 foster families[8]. The Fostering Network, a charity that represents foster carers, estimates that a further 8,000 foster carers are needed across the UK[50]. As part of the Choice Protects review, the DfES funded the Fostering Network to publish a guide to the recruitment and retention of foster carers[51], which examines the successful, and not so successful, recruitment and retention strategies used by local authorities across England.

Many black and minority ethnic children and children of mixed heritages are over-represented in the care system and have to wait too long for permanent placements. The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) has launched an initiative aimed at recruiting black and minority ethnic foster carers. BAAF has been funded by the Association of London Government to actively support family placement professionals within local authorities and voluntary agencies in London to improve levels of recruitment of black and minority ethnic foster carers. Visit www.baaf.org.uk for more information[52].

Successful recruitment practice based on word-of-mouth, small cash incentives and targeted schemes (such as the initiative identified above) appear to work best for the recruitment of foster carers. The involvement of foster carers in recruitment campaigns has also been shown to have a positive impact on recruitment[7].

Practice example
Small cash incentives are increasingly used to boost recruitment of foster carers. Local authorities such as Southampton City Council pay their foster carers £20 for introducing a potential foster carer and a further £200 once they have been approved and a child has been placed with them[53].

Research suggests that loss of foster carers is quite low, at 10% or less a year, which reflects the high level of commitment which carers have to foster children and the fulfilment that they get from caring. Support is crucial to the retention of foster carers, both on an everyday basis and in times of crisis, such as in the event of an allegation of abuse by a young person. Research studies highlight the importance of the following factors to foster carer retention:

- frequent contact with social workers
- feeling treated as colleagues
- guaranteed respite care
- the availability of out-of-hours telephone helplines
- well managed payment systems
- higher than average levels of pay
- easy access to specialist help and advice
- opportunities for taking part in training with other foster carers as a means to developing informal social support networks[7,8]

"If prospective foster carers could meet ... with more than a just a couple of people ... they could see that we actually support each other.... I think that if new people coming in realise that they don't have to do it by themselves, because foster carers talk to each other, [then] that is helpful." (foster carer in consultation group[54])

6.2. Birth families

The significance of birth families to foster children cannot be underestimated. Most fostering is short term with the primary aim of the child or young person returning home.

Good outcomes are dependent on the services provided to birth families as well the fostering services provided to children or young people.

6.2.1. Contact with birth families

Where fostering is longer term, foster children often feel ambivalent about how much, and in what ways, they want contact with their families. There are also wide differences between children about how much contact that they want: some want to move away from their families, some want to return to their birth families but still see a lot of their foster carers, others want to see something of their birth families but remain in foster care, and others just want to live at home.

There is a presumption in the 1989 Children Act that, wherever practicable, contact with birth families is required. Recent research evidence, however, suggests that contact requires very careful management and supervision to prevent any potential disruption to the young people's placement[8]. Some things that can help the management of contact include:

- paying attention to children's views of the importance of different family members, and ensuring the child's welfare and safety during contact
- setting clear boundaries for contact, distinguishing between contact with different family members, for different purposes and different contexts
- valuing the views of foster carers who are vital in helping children make sense of their family structures
- identifying and involving, where appropriate, other members of the young person's social support network who could provide care and attention[8]

In order to ensure a secure base for children, two important means of providing a determined link between foster children and the birth family are:

- making more use of, as well as supporting, family and friends' carers
- developing both supportive and therapeutic foster care schemes

6.2.2. Kinship care

Foster care with family or friends, otherwise known as kinship care, has the potential to build on existing relationships, make visits with birth families easier, protect black and minority ethnic children from losing touch with their ethnic and cultural identities, and spare the child or young person the trauma of being moved from their community and placed with strangers. Many young people describe a sense of security when living with their extended family which comes from the love, belonging and sense of identity they receive[55,56].

"I love to know that I belong to somebody, I'm loved by people and it's good to know that I have got somewhere to come after school that I call home." (young person being looked after by family carers[57])

Kinship carers face unique barriers, however. They tend to be poorer (between two fifths and one third living in poverty), older (the majority are grandparents and over 50 years old), and they receive less in the way of services such as assessment, training and financial support than local authority carers. They may also face particular difficulties over contact with birth parents, difficulties that should be addressed within the care planning process[58,59].

In addition, extended family members continue to be overlooked in care planning meetings, suggesting that family members are not approached to act as carers. Yet research with care leavers shows that links with family networks remain important, particularly links with mothers, grandparents, siblings and aunts. One study of care leavers found that the majority could name a relative that they felt that they could rely on, which the family member was able to confirm. This study also found that in the majority of cases the young person's social worker had no idea why this so-called 'key kin' had not been invited to reviews[60].

Unfortunately, this failure to involve key kin ignores the role that families and friends have always been willing to play in looking after children who cannot live with or be cared for by their parents[59]. In particular, black commentators have expressed concern that the kinship arrangements of black and minority ethnic groups are overlooked by white social workers who may lack the knowledge or 'cultural competence' to understand the family formations or cultural expectations of black families[61].

"Black people have a tradition of kinship care, which, with the right economic resources to support it, could easily be transferred here, and indeed, transfers here even when resources are lacking." (Beverley Pravett-Goldstein, black rights activist and trainer[62])

In light of the difficulties of recruiting foster carers, the use of family and friends may help resolve part of the shortfall in foster placements. Given the disproportionate number of black children in the care system, finding kinship placements that protect the ethnic identities of black and minority ethnic children may be particularly valuable[63].

Indeed, one qualitative study of 30 African-American kinship carers showed that support for the children in their care from the wider kin network helped promote positive child outcomes. This study also found that resilient children were more likely to live in families which were structured and which had clear boundaries and well-defined roles[64].

6.2.3. Keeping connections

As well as listening to the views of children and young people, another way workers can help children identify and connect with family

members is the use of life story work with photographs of people in their social support network and moments from the young person's life gathered from network members. It is important that this work is ongoing and foster carers take photos of significant events such as birthdays, new schools and friends to help children and young people keep a record of their lives.

Life story work is about helping children express their feelings, preserving a sense of self and keeping connected with key kin, including foster carers. It can help children and young people make sense of their past and help them move forward[65]. It should be remembered, however, that life story work is a difficult and delicate area and is not appropriate for all children at particular stages of their lives.

The use of a social network map or use of an eco-map where the attachment network is mapped out and discussed is also a key means of helping foster children remain connected with family and friends[66]. This can be used independently or as part of life story work. Trigger questions could be developed that would be explored with the young person:

- Who is important to you in your life now?
- How close is each person to you?
- Who do you see?
- Who would you like to see?
- What changes would you like in the ways things are now?[29]

6.2.4. Family Group Conferences

Where there is conflict between what the child or young person wants by way of contact and what adults see as positive and helpful, then family group meetings may play a useful role in mediating the difficulties. In some local authorities, family group meetings have been formalised and take a much wider role in terms of decision making about the care and protection of the child or young person. These meetings are called Family Group Conferences (FGCs).

The Family Rights Group, which provides advice and support for families whose children are involved with social services, promotes the use of FGCs as a means to harness and build on the knowledge, strengths and resources in families and communities. Barnardo's, the Family Rights Group and NCH have produced extensive practice guidance on developing FGCs. For more information visit www.barnardos.org.uk, www.frg.org.uk and www.nch.org.uk[67]

FGCs can also help to 'discover' previously unknown family members who may be appropriate kinship carers. This method of recruitment is constrained, however, because of the limited use of FGCs. At the moment, within the UK there are just 59 FGC projects registered with the Family Rights Group, across a variety of statutory and volunteers organisations.

Practice example

FGCs can help to identify kinship carers. These conferences have been instrumental in discovering family and friends willing to be involved in the care of looked-after children[68].

6.2.5. Practice and service delivery issues

Kinship care is not a cure-all. Evidence from Knowledge review 5: *Fostering success: An exploration of the research literature in foster care*[8] suggests that research on outcomes is equivocal. Some studies report that children placed with kinship carers experience fewer psychological problems, while other studies suggest that children are more likely to experience further abuse or neglect. Early research suggested that breakdowns were uncommon but recent work suggests that placements are as likely to break down as those provided by strangers. Careful consideration should be paid to the relative strengths and weaknesses of kinship and non-kinship care, focusing on ways to support the placement so that the young person can achieve 'emotional permanence' or a sense of security from being loved[8].

Research finding
Policy development is required at central and local level to address inconsistencies in the use, and treatment of, kinship carers, specifically:

- variations in the use of relative placements across the country
- the lack of policies or inconsistent policies
- the inequitable treatment of kinship carers both financially and in terms of other forms of support[69]

6.3. Foster carers and birth families

Another way of providing a more determined link between foster care and family is the development of specialist schemes that provide support to the birth family as well as to the fostered child or young person. Specialist schemes include:

- support foster care where the foster carers are seen as a support to the entire family
- treatment foster care which includes the ability to train birth parents in the same approach

6.3.1. Support foster care

Foster carers can work with birth parents in a variety of ways. Some of the most valued forms of cooperation are the provision of short breaks or respite care, most commonly, but not exclusively, for the parents of disabled children. More recently, the development of 'support care schemes', specifically Bradford Support Care and Birmingham's Neighbourhood Care Service, have been working with teenage service users and their families to provide flexible breaks and prevent long-term family breakdown[7].

Support foster care schemes aim to provide:

- support to families in crisis
- placements that are time limited and agreed
- a wide variety of placement options from occasional day care to regular weekends
- a tailor-made service for each family[7]

Practice example
Bradford Support Care provides a part-time, flexible fostering service. This service aims to prevent long-term family breakdown by offering families support from part-time foster carers for planned, time-limited periods[70].

Traditional foster placements risk removing young people from their families full time for lengthy periods. Generally, such placements were not flexible enough to meet the needs of families, especially lone mothers who were struggling to cope with their adolescent offspring in a situation where there were long-standing difficulties related to family conflict, school problems, behavioural difficulties, mental health problems and drug and alcohol issues. Support foster care aims to alleviate some of these difficulties. The DfES has funded an evaluation of support foster care[71].

6.3.2. Treatment foster care

Some fostering schemes have been developed to provide specialised or therapeutic foster care. These schemes are marked by a number of features:

- an above-average level of support, training and remuneration of carers
- an often teenage user group with challenging behaviour
- a coordinated method of working that aims to treat behaviours in home, school and community
- clinical staff, including psychiatrists that support the placement
- a specified length of stay[8]

Treatment foster care is distinct from traditional foster care. Fostering has always been about providing nurturing, safe, and in some cases, custodial care for children who require placement outside of their family. Its primary aim has been the care and protection of

children. Children are referred to treatment foster care programmes, on the other hand, in order to specifically address their serious levels of emotional, behavioural and medical problems.

It aims to reduce such problems through a coordinated programme of working, maintain young people in their placement and to support birth families to care for the young person. The DfES is currently funding an £11 million pilot programme of treatment foster care. For more information visit www.dfes.gov.uk

Practice example

Treatment foster care aims to provide a locally based intervention for looked-after young people using innovative practice to reduce serious behavioural problems. The DfES programme will use a similar model to that developed in the US and will be targeted at young people who are:

- 11-16 years old
- displaying severe levels of challenging or anti-social behaviour, and/or
- self-harming, and/or
- involved in crime and who may be at risk of receiving a custodial sentence.

Treatment foster care is an intervention targeted at young people for whom more conventional approaches do not offer an effective solution. Such young people might in the past have been considered not fit for fostering. Existing treatment foster care programmes, such as that pioneered by the Maudsley Hospital in London, suggest positive outcomes in terms of placement stability and education in particular[72].

There is a long tradition of local authority and voluntary organisation collaboration with respect to services for children and young people with complex needs. Voluntary organisations often pioneer innovative developments which local authorities commission for their most troubled and troublesome teenagers[4]. Specialist schemes which offer the intensive support of carers, training of carers, social workers and where appropriate birth-parents in the same social learning approach combined with close attention to schooling have been positively evaluated in comparison to residential care in relation to both young offenders and disturbed children[8].

7

Feeling happy at school

After their family, the most important institution in the lives of most children and young people is their school[73]. Teachers and other adults in schools can listen to students, refrain from judgement and develop strong, caring relationships with them. The offer of a close relationship with a school counsellor appears to be a key resilience-enhancing factor for foster children.

Key reading

Education matters – for everyone working with children in public care[74]
This book provides social workers with essential information about education and provides education professionals with information about social care.

Believe in me[75]
Believe in me is aimed at designated teachers and other professionals concerned with the literacy development of young people in care.

7.1. Success at school

Success at school is crucial to the future opportunities of foster children. Yet the current educational achievements of foster children are low, with nearly half of all children in care leaving school with no qualifications at all[76]. It should be remembered that the scholastic difficulties of foster children often precede placement in foster care but are not apparently improved by it. In some cases, placement in foster care may exacerbate scholastic difficulties especially when children are moved to new schools closer to the homes of foster carers which can disrupt the continuity of their education[8].

It should also be remembered that the educational attainment of foster children is now improving, supported by the introduction of educational targets by the DfES and in Wales, the National Assembly[77]. The research literature suggests that there is some agreement on the factors that are likely to produce improved educational outcomes for looked-after children. These include:

- encouragement from carers and the presence of other children who can model academic involvement and success
- the presence of 'educational supports' (someone attending school events, access to local library, information on education rights and entitlements)
- contact with an educational psychologist reduces the likelihood of foster placement breakdown[8]

"My foster carer helped me a lot ... she made me more confident in my school work." (11-year-old girl[3])

Users of fostering services confirm that these factors can make an impact. Voices from Care Cymru, a user group of young people who are, or who have been looked after, in Wales, organised two conferences to consult with children and young people about the National Assembly for Wales' Children First programme.

A total of 97 children and young people were involved and their experience of education was a key theme, highlighting that young people wanted to succeed in school. You can find out more from the conferences by visiting www.vfcc.org.uk

The kinds of things that help young people to achieve include:

- encouragement to do well, including the expectation that young people in care will achieve 5 GCSEs
- getting help at home and at school, such as help from foster carers or access to an educational psychologist or a counsellor
- support to stay at college, financial as well as emotional[5]

The Fostering Network is working with local authorities in Scotland to develop schemes that find mentors for young people leaving the care system. Mentors can offer advice, guidance and support to young people, helping them to build on their existing talents and abilities and develop new ones, including attending college[78].

Practice example

A mentoring relationship can be an important turning point in lives of young people … for example, a teenage girl living in a sink estate had a father frequently in prison and a mother who was chemically dependent. She was doing poorly at school and a likely candidate for early drop out. Out of the blue she made a positive connection with a new young English teacher. With her encouragement and support, the girl caught up and is talking seriously (and realistically) about doing law in university. (case study provided by practitioner[79])

7.2. The good and bad news about school

The Social Exclusion Unit and The Who Cares? Trust carried out a consultation exercise into the educational experiences of children in care. Around 2,000 responses were received, making this one of the largest direct consultations undertaken with this group of children. See the results at www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk

The consultation found that children were positive about their education, attended school regularly, and were given support by adults. However, there are problems around the number of children who are changing schools, bullying and exclusions[80].

Key themes include the following:

The good news

Children in care consider education to be important, largely for career reasons:

- 97% said that they thought education was important
- 61% of these cited career prospects as the main reason.

Many of the children lived in an environment that already had some of the factors we associate with supporting a successful education:

- 91% had a quiet place to do their homework
- 81% had help with their schoolwork
- 71% had a computer where they lived.

Most children in care said they had adults that they could confide in or ask advice from:

- 87% said that there was a member of staff who they could talk to at school.

The bad news

A high proportion of children had been excluded from school (this includes self-perceived, unofficial and fixed term exclusions as well as permanent exclusions):

- 37% had at some point been excluded from school
- 51% of these said that more support would have helped them not get excluded.

The majority of children in care had been the victims of bullying. Most had told someone and this stopped the bullying, but for a significant minority it did not:

- 62% had been bullied
- 80% of those who had been bullied told someone
- 67% of those who told someone said this stopped the bullying[80]

7.3. Practice and service delivery issues

Published alongside the Green Paper *Every child matters*, the Social Exclusion Unit's (SEU) report on *Better education for children in care* aims to improve stability in care and support at school in order to help boost education and prospects for children in care, one of the most deprived groups of young people.

The measures outlined in the SEU report mean that children in care will get better personal education plans to support learning needs and more books to help learning at home. Designated teachers will encourage children in care to stay on at school after the age of 16 and more work placements will be available to help children in care fulfil their potential. The reports include the following:

- 'A better education for children in care'[76]
- 'A better education for children in care – summary'[81]
- 'Smart future' (young people's version)[3]

In order to support local authorities as they take action to improve the education of children in care, the SEU has also produced a practice guide called 'A better education for children in care: the issues'[82] which outlines the key issues emerging from their report and the steps some local authorities are taking to address them.

In the past there has been a perception that Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) have led the way in terms of providing additional educational support to foster children. In a survey of 55 IFAs, just over half of these agencies had employed an educational liaison officer and one fifth had an on-site school[83]. More recently, many local authorities have made big advances in these areas. The SEU has published seven fact sheets that outline examples of existing good practice from local authorities.

The fact sheets cover the following areas:

- 'Access to out of school activities'[84]
- 'Access to school'[85]
- 'Early years'[86]
- 'Health'[87]
- 'Post 16'[88]
- 'Support in education'[89]
- 'Support at home'[90]

Practice examples

Hampshire County Council has appointed a lead officer responsible for the education of children in public care, a dedicated staff group of teachers and a community therapist for looked-after children.

Cheshire County Council has an Education Support and Development Team that aims to improve educational achievement and opportunity. It includes an educational psychologist and three teachers who provide direct support and advice to children and foster carers[91]

Conclusion

This resource guide looked at how professionals can make a difference to young people's experience of foster care. It has looked at:

- how you (a childcare professional) matter
- why you matter
- ways in which you can make a difference

Research shows that focusing on the strengths of young people is crucial to future outcomes. This means focusing on 'resilience factors', or things that help children and young people do well in unpromising conditions.

Professionals play a crucial role in promoting the strengths of young people by supporting caring relationships, ensuring that school is a positive experience and findings ways of bolstering self-esteem and self-efficacy.

The resource guide has aimed to benefit your practice by:

- helping you to engage in debates in your own agencies about what policies will best serve children and their families
- providing a short, accessible review of the knowledge base on adopting a resilience-based approach to assist you in your own cases
- identifying practice examples of where social work and social care agencies work positively to support the strengths of children and their families

The guide has looked at ways that you, as a childcare professional, can help foster the future success of fostered children and young people.

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Appendix 1: Membership of the SCIE Advisory Group on Fostering

- **Professor Malcolm Hill**, Director, Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society, Glasgow University
- **Iris Amoah**, Team Manager, Fostering Team, Hackney Social Services
- **Mark Burgress**, service user representative, A National Voice
- **Beverley Clarke**, Health Visitor and Team Advisor, Lambeth Primary Care Trust
- **Clare Chamberlain**, Director, The Blueprint Project for a Child-Centred Public Care System
- **Vanessa Courtney**, Senior Manager, Portsmouth City Council, Association of Directors of Social Services
- **Rhonwyn Dobbing**, Professional Advisor, Social Services Inspectorate for Wales
- **Helen Hibbert**, Education Development Manager, The Who Cares? Trust
- **Hilary Rock**, Team Manager, Fostering Support Team, Waltham Forest Social Services Department
- **Emma de Zoete**, Policy Lead, Choice Protects Team, Department for Education and Skills
- **Sue Jardine**, service user representative, Association for Transracially Adopted and Fostered People (ATRAP)
- **Bill Kilgallon**, foster carer and Chief Executive, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)
- **Sue Gourvish**, Head of Development, The Fostering Network
- **Robert Tapsfield**, Chief Executive, Family Rights Group (now Chief Executive of The Fostering Network)
- **Benni-Jo Tyler**, service user representative, A National Voice
- **John Simmonds**, Head of Research, British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)
- **Marcia Spencer**, Independent Training Consultant, Talawa Social Work Training and Consultancy

Appendix 2: Key reading

Gilligan, R. (2001) *Promoting resilience: A resource guide on working with children in the care system*[28].

This book is packed with practical ideas for how to improve the quality of life of children in care. It carries two key messages of hope:

- the lives of children can be made better
- what social workers and carers do – even the little things – can make a difference

Cairns, K. (2002) *Attachment, trauma and resilience: Therapeutic caring for children*[34].

This book is written from the perspective of a foster carer and describes affirming personal resilience with children who find solitude difficult, encouraging social inclusion and personal and social efficacy, and the development of tranquillity, joy and a sense of wonder.

Daniel, B. and Wassell, S. (2002) *Assessing and promoting resilience in vulnerable children: A 3 volume set: The early years, The school years, Adolescence*[92].

This clear and practical workbook shows the importance of encouraging resilience in children and young people who live in challenging circumstances.

Newman, T. (2002) *Promoting resilience: A review of effective strategies for child care services*[26].

This report reviews the strategies, inventions and approaches that can help promote the resilience of children and young people. It addresses the following questions:

- What is resilience and why it is important to child welfare services?
- Why do some children and young people resist and overcome stressful episodes while others suffer long-term damage?
- How can a child welfare service promote resilience?

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